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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000113

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ZF](#) [XY](#) [GB](#)

SUBJECT: GABON: FIRST LADY COMMEMORATED AFTER DEATH

REF: LIBREVILLE 104

Classified By: Poloff Leslie Doumbia for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Ten African heads of state attended the funeral of 45-year old Edith Lucie Bongo Ondimba, wife of Gabonese president El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba and daughter of President Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo, in Libreville on March 18. In addition to Bongo and Sassou Nguesso, the presidents of Benin, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Sao Tome and Principe, and Togo attending the ceremony. The vice president of Ghana, prime ministers from Guinea (Conakry) and Senegal, the wife of President Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and several ministers from other African countries also flew in for the event. Several prominent African political leaders made noteworthy appearances, including former prime minister of Cote d'Ivoire and leader of the Rally of the Republicans (RDR) party Alassane Dramane Ouattara. END SUMMARY.

Networking Opportunities

¶2. (C) While the heads of state sat silently through the six-hour long homage portion of the ceremony, other guests, such as African Union (AU) Commission President and former Gabonese foreign minister Jean Ping, were busily networking. Ping was seen huddling with Ali Trekki, Libya's Africa specialist, as well as France's representatives, secretary-general of the presidency Claude Gueant, and minister for cooperation Alain Joyandet. Bongo's head rested on his chest for much of the ceremony, but he walked with little assistance. The visiting heads of state departed Libreville quickly during a break in the day-long ceremony.

The First Lady Receives
Diana-like Reception in Libreville

¶3. (SBU) President Bongo, accompanied by the two teenaged children from his marriage to Edith Lucie and other family members, returned to Libreville March 18 from Rabat with the remains of the former First Lady. No details have been released on the cause of her death on March 14. King Mohammed VI of Morocco, who provided privacy and secrecy during Mrs. Bongo's almost two-year period of medical care in Morocco, also provided the aircraft used by Bongo's family to transport the body to Libreville and then to Brazzaville on

March 20. Thousands of Gabonese lined the roughly six-mile route from the airport to the presidential palace to catch a glimpse of the funeral cortege, and then waited patiently for an opportunity to enter the palace itself to pay their final respects. The palace remained open throughout the night and the day of the funeral to accommodate the crowds. The formal funeral ceremony was followed by an ecumenical service at the palace, a rare occurrence in Gabon.

14. (U) Edith Lucie was well-liked in Gabon because of her humanitarian activities. A trained pediatrician, she founded a school for children with disabilities and worked with other African first ladies on an initiative to combat HIV/AIDS. She supported other health and education programs, as well as her husband's efforts to resolve regional conflicts.

Family Feuds

15. (C) Edith Lucie married President Bongo in 1990 at the age of 25. An unpopular move by Bongo at the time, the word in Libreville today is that Sassou Nguesso also opposed the marriage of his oldest daughter to Bongo, as did the traditional king of Bongo's Teke clan. The Teke and Sassou Nguesso's Mbochi ethnic group straddle a common border and their ongoing rivalry has played a role in the politics of both Gabon and Congo. Many Gabonese are not pleased that the First Lady will be buried in Congo in her ancestral village of Edou rather than in Gabon. They question the official Gabonese government explanation that the two families are following Mbochi tradition. Many even speculate that her

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remains were never even in Gabon, citing the fact that the casket remained closed for the entire ceremony.

COMMENT

16. (C) The ceremony for the First Lady bore the markings of a state funeral. Bongo's seniority among African leaders and their respect for him was borne out by the high-level turnout for the funeral. The decision to bury the body in Congo, with a second funeral there on March 22, bothered many Gabonese, and may figure into future friction between the two countries. END COMMENT.
REDDICK